

TO THE MEITEIS AND THE BISHNUPRIYAS

If we ask the Meiteis – “Who are the people closest to your society ?” – the reply will be – “the Bishnupriyas.”

If we ask the Bishnupriyas – “Who are the people closest to your society ?” – the reply will be – “The Meiteis.”

BY

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To The Meiteis and The Bishnupriyas

Conflict between the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas – The Problem:

For the last five or six decades, the Bishnupriyas and the Meiteis are in a constant conflict with each other on the issue of their identity. The Meiteis, claiming that they are the real Manipuris, deny the 'Manipuri-ness' of the Bishnupriyas on the ground that they are but immigrants into the valley of Manipur from Assam and Bengal. The Bishnupriyas also, claiming that they are the real Manipuris, deny the 'Manipuri-ness' of the Meiteis on the ground that they are but immigrants from the surrounding hills. This conflict has at present given rise to a painful situation in the context of the nomenclature of the languages of both the groups. The language of the Meiteis has now been declared as 'Meitei' or 'Manipuri' with the contention that these two terms are synonymous. To this, the Bishnupriyas object that the language of the Meiteis should not be called 'Manipuri'; it should be called 'Meitei' or, at best, 'Meitei Manipuri'. On the other side, the Bishnupriyas are demanding for the recognition of their language as Bishnupriya Manipuri, to which the Meiteis object that the term 'Manipuri' should not be used along with the term 'Bishnupriya'.

The real position :

Now, the real position is this that, the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas are descendants of two

distinct races coming from two different directions. The Meiteis belong to the Mongoloid group and have come from the east, while the Bishnupriyas belong to the Aryo-Dravidio-Mongoloid group and have come from the west. The languages of these two sections have also developed from two different stocks. The Meitei language developed from the Tibeto - Burman stock; the Bishnupriya Manipuri language, from the Māgadhi Prākṛta of Indo-Aryan.

But in spite of these differences in regard to the racial and linguistic origin of these two sections, a sense of 'one community' has developed between them, as it is clear from the following facts.

- 1) These two groups of people have been living in the valley of Manipur at least for 13 centuries.
- 2) These two groups have formed a homogenous culture. (For details, see the next article).
- 3) The languages of both the groups were formed on the soil of Manipur, and in the formation of either of these languages, elements from the other language have been borrowed profusely. For the vocabulary of the Bishnupriya Manipuri language, in particular, Meitei forms the second largest stock, only after Sanskrit.
- 4) The present land of Manipur was formerly divided into small territories, such as, Khumol, Moirang etc. All these territories were combined into a unified state only during the 16th century, and the name 'Manipur' was given to this unified state during the last part of the 17th century or the first part of the 18th century.
- 5) Since the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas--both living in this land at least for 11 centuries

formed a homogenous culture by that time, and since both the language were formed on this soil centuries before that time, both the sections had equal right to identify themselves and their languages as 'Manipuri', when the name 'Manipur' was given to the land. (For further clarification, I have appended here (a) my statement submitted to the Assam Backward Classes Commission, (b) some extracts from my work 'The Bishnupriya Manipuris', (c) an Appendix from the same work and some extracts from the Assam Backward Classes Commission's Report.)

Homogenous Culture

The socio-cultural unity of these two sections of people is so striking that they cannot be distinguished from each other. In this connection the following points may be noted. First Kirtana and Rasalila are the central elements of the culture of both the sections; and the singers, dancers and drummers of both the sections, living anywhere—whether in Manipur, or in Assam, or in Bangladesh—sing the same songs and tunes (e. g , অজবুদ্বাদনাথ, etc. আরতি অজবুদ্বাদনাথ etc. আই-বি-না-তো-না etc.), dance the same dances, and beat the same beats or tāla-s, maintaining equally all the minute and complicated rules of the respective sciences or performances. The Rasalila performance which enchanted Visvakavi Rabindranath was that performed by the Bishnupriyas of Machimpur, Sylhet, and teachers appointed by Visvakavi in Shantiniketan to teach Manipuri dance belong to both the sections. Even now, artists teaching Manipuri dance outside the

Manipuri society belong to both the sections. Secondly, there is no bar to establishing matrimonial relation between these two sections and to taking part jointly in social feasts and performances. Thirdly, the Bishnupriyas, in accordance with their established social rules, (i) do not allow persons of any other community to take part in their social feasts, (ii) do not take meals prepared by persons of any other community, and (iii) do not allow any person of their community to marry any person of any other community. But they (i) freely take part in social feasts with Meiteis, (ii) freely take meals prepared by the Meiteis, and (iii) establish matrimonial relation with the Meiteis. The Brahmins, in particular, of both these sections have complete freedom to establish matrimonial relation between them and to act as priests in the socio-religious performances of both the sections. Neither the Meiteis nor the Bishnupriyas can imagine such closeness with the persons of any other community. That is why, people of both the sections have a natural feeling of kinship. Hence, if we ask the Meiteis "Who are the people closest to your society?" — the reply will be — "The Bishnupriyas" And if we ask the Bishnupriyas — "who are the people closest to your society?" — the reply will be — "The Meiteis".

The Question of Gain and Loss

Both the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas should ponder over the matter whether they are going to gain something out of this antagonism. By denying

the 'Manipuri-ness' of the Bishnupriyas, the Meiteis are surely not going to get anything in return. In the same way, the Bishnupriyas are also not going to gain anything by denying the 'Manipuriness' of the Meiteis.

The Meiteis might think that, by denying the 'Manipuri-ness' of the Bishnupriyas, they would snatch away the facilities enjoyed by the Bishnupriyas in the fields of Manipuri dance, Manipuri culture etc. But it is a wrong idea; for non-Manipuris like the Bengalees, the Gujratis, the Maharastrians and others are also now given to teach Manipuri dance in different parts of the country. Some non-Manipuri artists have been awarded also by the Govt. of India for their mastery over Manipuri dance. Likewise, by denying the 'Manipuri-ness' of the Meiteis, the Bishnupriyas also cannot snatch away any facility enjoyed by the Meiteis.

On the contrary, we are sure that both the sections will incur loss by this business of antagonism. The Meiteis must know that the elimination of the Bishnupriyas will go against the expansion of Manipuri culture, for, in that case, the sphere of Manipuri culture will be confined to a smaller group of people. Limitation in the field of culture will affect the progress of the Meiteis in the political and economic fields also. The Bishnupriyas also should understand that, by eliminating the Meiteis,

they will lose their kinship with a big section, and that this loss of kinship will affect their progress in the political and economic fields also.

Thus, a logical study of the situation shows that from this antagonism with each other, neither the Meiteis nor the Bishnupriyas will gain anything; rather, they will incur loss in various fields. On the other hand, both the sections are sure to gain in cultural, economic and political fields, by maintaining their brotherly relation.

The Meiteis generally hold that if the Bishnupriyas are accepted as Manipuris, their own identity will be affected. But we do not find any logic in this contention. In the past, when both the sections were known as 'Manipuris' the identity of neither the Meiteis nor the Bishnupriyas was at all affected. Likewise, in future also, the acceptance of the 'Manipuri-ness' of the Bishnupriyas will not at all affect the identity of the Meiteis; rather, it will expand the scope of the concept of 'Manipuri'.

An Appeal

We, therefore, appeal to the leaders of both the sections of the Manipuris to accept the reality of the concept of 'one community' and give up their gainless practice of antagonism. I request the Bishnupriyas not to oppose the Meiteis in identifying their language as 'Meitei' or 'Manipuri' Likewise, I request the Meiteis also not to stand in the way of the Bishnupriyas in getting their language recognised as 'Bishnupriya Manipuri', for the age-old tradition of 'Manipuri-ness' ingrained in the hearts of the

Bishnupriyas cannot be wiped out. Let us accept also the reality of 'cultural unity' existing between these two sections and try to revive our earlier sense of kinship. Let us sing, dance and eat together; let the artists—singers, dancers, drummers and others—of both the sections take part in the kīrtana, Rāsalīlā etc. of both the sections. The difference in our languages matters little; we may perform Kīrtana and Rāsalīlā in both the languages and enjoy them equally.

We believe that a greater number of people in both the sections are in favour of reviving their age-old relation; it is under the pressure of a few separatists in both the sections that they are not in a position to express their views. We request those people favouring unification to come forward with their views and also those people propagating separatism and antagonism to be led not by emotion but by logic. Such a revival of brotherly relation between the two sections is sure to expand the horizon of the culture common to both the sections.



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APPENDIX : I

Statement Submitted To The Assam Backward classes commission ✓

The Bishnupriyas are certainly Manipuris:

Keeping aside the question of the pre-historic position of the land and people of Manipur, we may put forward the following historical, socio-cultural and legal points to show that the Bishnupriyas, like the Meiteis, are verily Manipuris :

1. Historical Points :

a) Though the Bishnupriyas never identify themselves as Mayangs, the Meiteis sometimes call them Mayangs. And the written history of the Mayangs in Manipur goes back to the 7th century A. D., if not earlier. Hence it is groundless to hold that the Bishnupriyas (or Mayangs) are not Manipuris.

b) Formerly, Manipur was an independent state, and all the people of Manipur were identified as Manipuris. Of course, this concept of 'Manipuri' was not accepted by some tribes like the Nagas, the Lusheis etc., as they are but off shoots of the people of the neighbouring states. But as the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas were wholly confined to Manipur itself, they identified themselves as 'Manipuris'. At present also, both these groups in their social forum indentify themselves as 'Manipuris', without any discrimination.

Please see articles 3 (page-2), 4 (page-3), 11 (page-13) and Appendix II (page-41-46) of "The Bishnupriya Manipuris" attached herewith:

2. Socio-Cultural Points:

a) The Bishnupriyas and the Meiteis have formed a homogenous culture. Their kīrtana, Rāsa-līlā, dance, music, dress, style of living, food-habit, marriage-system, shraddha-system and all other socio-cultural matters are identical in nature. For centuries, the same songs and rāgas of Kīrtana and Rāsa are sung uniformly by the people of both these sections living anywhere—whether in Manipur, Assam, Tripura or Bagladesh.

b) The Bishnupriyas never accept into their society any member of their community marrying some person of any other community, but they have no objection to establish matrimonial relation with the Meiteis. And, actually, marriage between these two communities—particularly, among the Brahmins of both these groups—is regularly and formally held. The Bishnupriyas never allow any person of any other community to take part in their socio-religious feasts, but they not only allow but also invite the Meiteis to take part in such feasts. In religio-cultural functions, artists like singers, drummers, dancers etc. of both these sections of people jointly take part, without the least sense of 'otherness'.

Please see Appendix II (pages-41-46) of "The Bishnupriya Manipuris" attached herewith.

3) Legal points :—

That the Bishnupriyas have been legally accepted as 'Manipuris' by the Govt. of India

both of the British regime and of the Independent India can be attested by the following facts :

✓ a) George Grierson in his Linguistic Survey of India Vol-V, Part-I has described the Bishnupriyas as 'Bishnupuriya Manipuris'.

✓ b) In the statistics of students of the School Board, Cachar, during the British regime, the main heading 'Manipuri' was sub-divided into 'Meitei' and 'Bishnupriya'.

✓ c) In the Census Report of India, 1951, also the main heading 'Manipuri' was sub-divided into 'Meitei' and 'Bishnupriya'.

✓ d) In the Census Report of India, 1971, the nomenclature 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' has been strongly defended.

From these and other facts, it can be well surmised that the Bishnupriyas, like the Meiteis, are verily Manipuris. This matter is clear as sun-shine and no question should be raised against it. Accordingly, the term 'Manipuri' includes the Bishnupriyas also. But, as the Meiteis strengthened by the political power, or rather, the state-power of Manipur are constantly raising the slogan that 'the Bishnupriyas are not Manipuris' it has become imperative to include the 'Bishnupriya Manipuris' in the list of OBC or in any other list to safeguard the identity of the community.

APPENDIX : II

Extracts From "The Bishnupriya Manipuris"

1) The Manipuris are divided, from a linguistic point of view, into two groups, namely the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas. The Meiteis entered Manipur from the east; their language is of the Tibeto-Burman group and is akin to Naga and Lushei. The Bishnupriyas entered Manipur from the west; their language is of the Indo-Aryan group and is akin to Assamese and Bengali. The term 'Meitei', is most probably derived from māi=people (comp. Burmese māi=man) + tāi=the Tāi people, and the term 'Bishnupriya', from 'Bishnupur' (the name of a place in Manipur) + iyā (a suffix coming from Sanskrit 'ika' and meaning 'relating to').

The language of the Bishnupriya Manipuri is called Bishnupriya Manipuri. G. A. Grierson calls it 'Bishnupuriya Manipuri', while Dr. S. K. Chatterjee calls it simply 'Bishnupuriya'; Both G. A. Grierson and Dr. S. K. Chatterjee denote this language by the term 'Mayang' also. But it is a misnomer. Mayang is a term used by the Meiteis with reference to the Bishnupriyas in a deprecatory sense. Practically, however, this language is called 'Mayang' neither by the speakers themselves nor by the Meiteis. P. I

(2) It is said that these people were followers of the Viṣṇu-cult from very ancient times. They installed the image of Lord Viṣṇu at a place in Manipur, which

was given the name 'Bishnupur'. And, as the culture of these people had its headquarters at this Bishnupur, they were called the 'Bishnupuriyas' i. e., the inhabitants of Bishnupur, and 'Bishnupriya' is a contracted form of the term 'Bishnupuriya'. This tradition is in harmony with the name 'Bishnupuriya Manipuri' recorded by G. A. Grierson. — P. 2

(3) BPM betrays some distinctive features which exist neither in Bengali nor in Assamese. A language with such distinctive features did never exist outside Manipur before it came into being in the land. In other words, BPM was formed on the soil of Manipur and nowhere else. — PP. 2-3

(4) BPM has developed from the Māgadhī prākṛta and ranks with Bengali, Oriya and Assamese. This is clear from the fact that it has retained the dominant characteristics of Māgadhī. — P. 8

APPENDIX III
(Reprinted from "The Bishnupriya
Manipuris" pages 41-46)

ON THE TERM 'BISHNUPRIYA MANIPURI'

(1) Controversy between the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas

There has been a great controversy between the Bishnupriyas and the Meiteis on the use of the nomenclature 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' to identify the Bishnupriyas and their language. According to the Meiteis, they are the 'real Manipuris' inhabiting the land of Manipur from centuries before Christ, while the Bishnupriyas are the descendants of some Bengalees who entered the land only a few centuries back. Accordingly, the Meiteis call the Bishnupriyas 'Mayang's, i. e, 'foreigners' or 'westerners' and hold that the Bishnupriyas should not use the term 'Manipuri' either before or after the term 'Bishnupriya', to identify themselves and their language. This issue has been taken for discussion here.

It should be noted that the Bishnupriyas also, quite contrary to the view of the Meiteis, hold that, they are the 'real Manipuris' inhabiting the land from the time of the Mahābhārata War and that the Meiteis are the descendants of some immigrants from the surrounding hills. The Bishnupriyas, accordingly, call the Meiteis 'Khāi's. i. e., 'the people of the Chinese group' and hold that the Meiteis should not use the term 'Manipuri' to identify themselves and their language.

Thus, the people of each of these two sections try to identify themselves as the real Manipuris and regard those of the other section as non-Manipuris. In this encounter, the Bishnupriyas have been put in a disadvantageous position because of the fact that their language is now extinct in Manipur and that the Meitei language has been recognised as 'Manipuri' by the Govt. of India. Some Bishnupriyas are even now against the use of the term 'Manipuri' to denote the Meiteis or the 'Meitei language'. But, the Bishnupriyas in general are not so much against the use of the term 'Manipuri' in the sense of Meitei, as for the defence of the use of the term 'Manipuri'—either as a prefix or as a suffix—along with the term 'Bishnupriya'.

2. The Concepts of 'Manipur' and 'Manipuri'

Historians without any prejudice will agree that the concepts of 'Manipur' and 'Manipuri' are not very old. No old record of Manipur has retained these names. It is quite likely that the land was known as Manipur towards the 17th century, and the people were called Manipuris after that time. Formerly, the present Manipur was divided into small territories occupied by different clans, such as, the Khumals, the Moirangs, the Angoms, the Ningthoujas (Meiteis) and the Luangs, and the different territories were known by the names of the respective clans. The people of these clans used to identify themselves and their languages by the names of their respective clans. Towards the

5th century A. D., the Meiteis occupied all the territories and established a sovereign kingdom

which was known to the Meiteis as 'Meitei Leipak' or 'the land of the Meiteis'. As a result of this Meiteisation, the languages of the different clans got intermixed and, consequently, the modern Meitei language was formed. In other words, the Meitei language, as it is understood today, was formed after the 15th century A. D. /

The Bishnupriyas were living in the valley of Manipur from centuries before the period of Meiteisation. A full discussion on the controversies on this point will lead us a long way off. To avoid this at present, this much can be said that, the Meiteis call the Bishnupriyas 'Mayang's, and the history of the Mayangs in Manipur goes back to the 7th century A. D., if not still earlier. That does not mean that Bishnupriya language, as it is understood today, is the language of those Mayangs of the 7th or the 8th century. Bishnupriya is a New Indo-Aryan and, as such, it could not be formed before the 11th or 12th century A. D. It can, however, be said that the Bishnupriya language is a developed form of, or is somehow related to, the language of those immigrants who entered Manipur before the 12th or 13th century A. D. Before the 12th or the 13th century A. D., the Mayangs or Bishnupriyas in Manipur spoke different forms of Late Middle Indo-Aryan or Apabhramśa, of which Eastern Magādhī was pre-dominant. And, the Bishnupriya language, as it is understood today, was formed towards the 14th and the 15th centuries as a result of the admixture of those different dialects of Indo-Aryan and Meitei.

We may summarise the position thus : First, the different clans of the Mongoloid people and the Mayangs or Bishnupriyas were living side by side in Manipur for centuries before the 15th century. Secondly, the Meitei language was formed after the 15th century A. D., and the Bishnupriya language was formed towards the 15th century A. D.— both on the soil of Manipur. On the other hand, the term 'Manipur' was attributed to the land. in all probability, after this period, i. e., towards the 17th century, when the land was on way to full Aryanisation, in consequence whereof the term 'Manipuri' was attributed to the people of Manipur. So, when the terms of 'Manipur' and 'Manipuri' came into use, both the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas had 'equal right' to them. And, practically, people of both these sections used these two terms, i. e., 'Manipur' and 'Manipuri', without any reservation to identify their land and themselves, respectively.

3. Formation of a Homogeneous Culture :

Culturally, the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas cannot be distinguished from each other. As to religion, it goes without saying that these two sections have formed a unique religion. The Bishnupriyas accepted all the prominent gods of the Meiteis, namely, Sarālel, Pāhānpā, Senāmāhi, Apokpā and others, just as the Meiteis adopted numerous Hindu gods. At the next step, when the Vaiṣṇavism of Śrī Caitanya entered Manipur, people of both these sections, excepting a very few,

adopted the religion. This religion brought a radical change in the Manipuri society, and both the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas were equally, influenced by it. As a result, they developed a homogeneous culture, and the concept of one community grew among them. This can be testified by the fact that there was no bar to matrimonial relation between these two sections. A girl of any section could formally be accepted into the other section without any propitiation. Even now, members of these two sections jointly take part in religious and social feasts and ceremonies. 'Kīrtana' and 'Rāsālīlā', the greatest features of Manipuri culture, have got equal prominence in both the sections. Members of both the sections equally take part in them, and equally feel proud for them. Artists of any section participate with equal status and with a feeling of kinship in the 'Kirtana's of the other section. Marriage system, dress, ornaments and others are all common to both the sections. Thus, it is clear that the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas have formed a homogeneous culture.

The only impediment is, as ill luck would have it, the difference of language : the Meitei language is of the Tibeto-Burman group, whereas the Bishnupriya language is of the Indo-Aryan group. In Manipur, there is no problem, because the Bishnupriyas living there have adopted Meitei as their mother tongue. But the Bishnupriyas who had to leave Manipur before the final unification, have retained their language outside the land. Yet,

none can deny the fact that these two sections are culturally one.

4. Conventional use of the Terms 'Bishnupriya', 'Meitei' and 'Manipuri' :

Any person without prejudice will agree that no person belonging to any of these two sections uses the term 'Manipuri' to introduce himself and his language to one of the other section. People of both the sections simply use the terms 'Meitei' and 'Bishnupriya' for the purpose. It is only when they want to identify themselves and their language to one of any other community that they use the term 'Manipuri'. This term is used by both the sections with equal force; it was never monopolised by any section. And, to be frank, the Meiteis are more in favour of the term 'Meitei'. They call their land 'Meitei Leipāk', their dance 'Meitei Jagoi', their language 'Meitei', and so on. In Calcutta University also their language was recognised as 'Meitei (Manipuri)'. The Bishnupriyas, on the other hand, are more in favour of the term 'Manipuri'. Even a few years back, a Bishnupriya would identify himself not as 'Bishnupriya', but as Manipuri.

5. Present Position of the Term 'Manipuri' :

After a few years of India's Independence, the term 'Manipuri' has been chosen for 'Meitei' by the Govt. of India, as there are no indigenous Bishnupriya speakers in Manipur. And the formal use of the term 'Manipuri' by the Meiteis is still in process. But the Bishnupriyas, in pursuance of

their tradition, call themselves and their language 'Manipuri' even now, and use the term 'Bishnupriya' to distinguish either from 'Meitei', just as the Meiteis use the term 'Manipuri' to identify themselves and their language and the term 'Meitei' to distinguish either from 'Bishnupriya'. Even today, no Meitei introduces himself to a Bishnupriya as 'Manipuri'.

6. Probable Solution of the Conflict :

To summarise the whole position, (1) both the Bishnupriyas and the Meiteis were inhabiting Manipur side by side for centuries, (2) both Meitei and Bishnupriya were formed on the soil of Manipur some five or six hundred years ago, (3) both the sections have a common stock of culture and, (4) both the sections use the term 'Manipuri' in common to identify themselves. So, the solution would have been to use the terms 'Meitei Manipuri' and 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' for 'Meitei' and 'Bishnupriya' respectively. But the course of events has changed the position. The present writer has nothing to say against the use of the term 'Manipuri' for 'Meitei', but he finds no reason why the Bishnupriyas should not be allowed to use the term 'Manipuri', along with the differentia 'Bishnupriya'. The tradition behind the term 'Manipuri' is ingrained in the hearts of the Bishnupriyas. They are proud of the Manipuri culture— its dance, Kirtana, dress etc. If, in spite of all this, they are not allowed to use the term 'Manipuri' to identify themselves and their language, they will be cut off from the mainstream of the culture and civilisation of Manipur, of which they

feel so proud. If the Meiteis consider these factors with a liberal and sympathetic heart, they will find that the Bishnupriyas' love for the term 'Manipuri' is quite reasonable and that it is not a mere emotion. The Bishnupriyas have every right to use the term 'Manipuri'. If they are not allowed to do so, we shall have reasons to think that some subversive factors behind are at work. The present writer thinks that if the Meitei intelligentsia come forward with a considerate attitude, the problem will certainly be solved, and the brotherly feeling between the two sections will be regained.

APPENDIX : IV

EXTRACTS FROM THE " ORDER " OF A B C COMMISSION DATED 29 TH SEPTEMBER, 1995 :

The Bishnupriya Manipuri people of Assam through their Associations, namely, the Bishnupriya Manipuri Samaj Santha, the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha and the Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Students Union (hereinafter called as the petitioners) have prayed for an order directing an amendment of the Serial No. 13 (Manipuri) of the Assam Other Backward Classes list by splitting it into two classes and to show the Bishnupriya Manipuri in one of these two classes. They have submitted Affidavits in support of their claim and filed documents to substantiate.

Dr K. P. Singha, Professor, Department of Sanskrit , Tripura University , Agartala submitted statements under his forwarding letter dated 22.10.94 supporting the claim of the petitioners. He has filed copies of his book " The Bishnupriya Manipuris— Their Language, Literature and Culture " to substantiate his statements .

The Meitei Manipuri group in Assam through their Associations, namely, the Manipuri Language Protection Committee, the United Manipuri Association, the All Assam Manipuri students Union and the All Assam Manipuri Women Welfare Association (hereinafter called as the objectors) have filed

objections. Their main objection is that the Bishnupriya people are not entitled to prefix or suffix the term 'Manipuri' for the purpose of Bishnupriya identity or Bishnupriya Language identity and have prayed to look into that the term 'Manipuri' is not illegally prefixed or suffixed to Bishnupriya while recognising the Bishnupriya people's identity or Bishnupriya language identity. They have filed Affidavits and documents in support of their objections.

The objectors have not filed any counter on the statement and Book, referred to above, of Dr K. P. Singha inspite of service of copy on them.

In the light of submissions by the parties with reference to originality of Meitei and Bishnupriya people and their languages in Manipur; and also at the same time their (both sections) identity and languages in Assam, we consider it proper to state briefly the acceptable position based on record/documents and our views as under :-

The inhabitants of Manipur did identify them as 'Manipuri' or 'Manipuris' since past centuries. The land 'Manipur' was formerly divided into small territory occupied by different clans, namely, the Khumals, the Muraings, the Angomas, the Ningthoujas and the Nungos. These territories were known after the names of the respective clans. The people of Ningthoujas clan were Meiteis. In course of time, the Meiteis occupied all those territories towards 15th Century AD and established a sovereign kingdom known as 'Meitei-Leipak' (land of the Meiteis). As a result of unification of those small

territories, the clans got intermixed and consequently, the modern Meitei language was formed after the 15th century AD. In course of time, this language was identified as 'Manipuri Language' as it is understood today.

Bishnupriyas were living in the Valley of Manipur from centuries before the establishment of 'Meitei-Leipak'. The Meiteis called the Bishnupriyas as 'Mayangs' and the history of 'Mayangs' in Manipur goes back to the 7th Century AD, if not still earlier. That does not mean that the Bishnupriya language, as it is understood today, is the language of those Mayangs of the 7th or 8th centuries. Bishnupriya language being a new Indo-Aryans origin and, as such, it could not be formed before the 11th or 12th centuries AD. The Bishnupriya language is a developed form of the language of the migrants who entered Manipur before the 12th or 13th centuries AD. Prior to that period, the Mayangs or Bishnupriyas in Manipur spoke different forms of dialects of late Middle Indo-Aryans or Apabhramsa in which Eastern Magadhi was predominant. The Bishnupriya language as it is understood today was formed towards the 14th and 15th centuries as a result of the mixture of those different dialects of Indo-Aryans group. This language of the Bishnupriya was called 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' language and it has been highly developed.

The Meiteis/Ningthoujas entered Manipur from east, and most probably of Tai origin and their original spoken language was Tibeto-Burma Group. Whereas, the Bishnupriyas entered Manipur from

west and their original spoken language was Indo-Aryan group slightly akin to Bengali. The Bishnupriya people were purely followers of Bishnu-cult from very ancient times. They installed the image of Lord Bishnu at Bishnupur, a place in Manipur. The centre of culture of these people being at Bishnupur, so they were named 'Bishnupurias' (inhabitants of Bishnupur) and thus 'Bishnupriya' was a contracted form of 'Bishnupurias'. This tradition is confirmed with the name 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' in the record of GA Grierson.

Therefore, the position thus stands that the different clans of the Mangoloid people and the Mayangs/Bishnuprias lived side by side in Manipur for centuries before 15th century. The Meitei language was formed after 15 century AD and the Bishnupriya language was formed towards the 15 century AD, both on the soil of Manipur. The 'Manipuri' was attributed to the land, in all probability, after this period, i.e towards the 17th century when the land was on way to full Aryanisation, in consequence whereof the 'Manipuri' was attributed to the people of Manipur. Therefore, the terms 'Manipur' and 'Manipuris' have been in use by both the Meiteis and the Bishnuprias commonly with equal right to them; and, practically, people of both these clans used these two terms 'Manipur' and 'Manipuris' without any reservation to identify their land and themselves respectively. In Assam since long past, both the Meiteis and the Bishnuprias had common recognition and identity as 'Manipuri, without any reservation and they have been maintaining

their recognition/identity as such for all practical purposes. But the Meitei section of people follow their language identifying as 'Manipuri' language, whereas the Bishnupriya section of people follow their language identifying as 'Bishnupriya-Manipuri' language.

The Bishnupriya in Assam, since their inception of migration (before 1806 and 1829 AD also thereafter) from Manipur, had with them their fully developed language called 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' and commonly / ordinarily kept in use for all purposes till date. Since that time the Manipuri people of Bishnupriya section in Assam identified them as Bishnupriya Manipuri with their language 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' which were commonly recognised in Assam without any reservation for all practical purposes. This is a settled position.

The term Manipuri or Manipuris in Assam include the Meiteis, Bishnupriyas and Manipuri Muslims. Majority of them had settled in the district of Cachar (old) and the rest are scatteredly living in other part of Assam. The culture of both the sections are uniform in all respects. Their Kirtan, Rasalila, dance, music, customary dress, food habit, living style, marriage and Sardha system and all other socio-cultural formalities are homogeneous. The only difference between the Meitei and Bishnupriya is linguistic point of view. The Meiteis follow the Manipuri language, whereas the Bishnupriyas follow the Bishnupriya Manipuri language. But in reality both the sections of people strictly identify

themselves as Manipuri. This is a settled position.

The Manipuri Muslims follow a different culture on Islamic traditions.

The Annual Return Forms of the Educational Department for schools in the district of Cachar distinctly indicated Meitei and Bishnupriya under one column as 'Manipuri' for their identification since several decades.

Sir George Grierson in his Linguistic Survey of India declared Bishnupriya section as Bishnupriya Manipuri' and their language as 'Bishnupriya Manipuri'. This view had been accepted and recognised by all the Authorities in India.

The above facts, discussions and observations lead us to express our views unhesitatingly that the nomenclatures 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' for identification of Bishnupriya section of people and their language have got the recognition in all circles and of the authorities. We, therefore, may observe this as a settled position.

In view of our over all findings and observations above, we hold that the nomenclature 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' for identification of Bishnupriya people and their language in Assam are justly in recognition and use.

In the result, we recommend for amendment of the Serial No.13 'Manipuri' in the list of OBC and to add the name of 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' therein. Let the amendment be made in the following form:

Serial No. 13—Manipuri including
Manipuri Brahmins, Manipuri Muslims
and Bishnupriya Manipuri.

It is requested that the Government of Assam
will implement the recommendation at the earliest.

□ × □



TO THE MEITEIS AND THE BISHNUPRIYAS

By

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